

Resolving the meat paradox: the role of animal-related meanings in the adoption of plant-based diets

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to approach the meat paradox – the conflict between meat consumption and concern for animals – from a sociocultural perspective, exploring the sociocultural meanings assigned to animals by those who have made the choice to reject meat and adopt plant-based diets.

Design/methodology/approach – A netnographic study was conducted, analysing publicly available writings from 26 bloggers who self-identified as vegans or vegetarians. This rarely used approach in meat paradox research captures natural discussions about confronting the dilemma, deepening our understanding of its sociocultural meanings.

Findings – The study identifies three key meanings – viewing animals as unique beings, as equal beings and as cared-for beings. It underscores that animals and human–animal relationships play a central role in shaping dietary choices, particularly when those choices challenge prevailing social norms. The study also details sub-meanings within these broader meaning categories. It shows that respect for animals' existence, recognition of their moral equality, and belief in their right to compassion and welfare are nuanced and deeply embedded in the cultural practices surrounding meat consumption.

Practical implications – The study encourages marketers and policymakers to address consumers' dilemmas concerning both animals and dietary choices. Promoting plant-based diets should highlight animals' individuality, equality and welfare, using integrated communication and social support to make compassionate, plant-based eating a socially accepted and sustained norm.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the meat paradox literature by adopting a sociocultural perspective, particularly addressing how animals and human–animal relationships frame consumers' perspectives on plant-based dietary choices.

Keywords Blog posts, Human–animal relationship, Meat paradox, Netnography, Plant-based diets, Sociocultural meanings

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

Meat production and consumption raise significant concerns among consumers, animal rights advocates, environmentalists and public health officials regarding the mistreatment of animals, environmental degradation and the increasing prevalence of lifestyle-related illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, obesity and cancer (e.g. [Bui et al., 2024](#)). Nonetheless, meat retains a prominent position on consumers' plates. Over the past 50 years, global demand for meat has more than tripled ([Ritchie et al., 2023](#)), and its consumption is predicted to increase worldwide by more than 10% by 2032 ([OECD/FAO, 2023](#)). Moreover, an omnivorous diet – which includes both animal and plant-based foods – is the prevailing social norm, with the consumption of meat widely considered acceptable and even necessary in many cultures ([Bryant et al., 2022](#); [Koskinen, 2022](#)). Despite increasing global interest in plant-based diets, their adoption, for example in Finland, has remained largely unchanged in recent years. Earlier estimates suggested that approximately 6% of the population identify as vegan or vegetarian ([Jallinoja, 2020](#); [Salmivaara et al., 2022](#)). More recent and more finely grained figures largely corroborate this picture, showing small shares of vegans (0.8%) and lacto(-ovo)-vegetarians (0.9%), alongside somewhat larger groups of pescatarians (3%) and semi-vegetarians (4%), while omnivorous diets remain dominant (91%) ([Silfver et al., 2026](#); [Simojoki et al., 2026](#)). This overall stability is further supported by [Koskinen \(2022\)](#), who notes that, despite growing interest in alternative protein sources, meat consumption in Finland continues to rise.

Studies suggest that consumers express support for both animal rights and the banning of factory farming ([Bryant et al., 2022](#)). This tension has led researchers to question why those who oppose harming animals nonetheless continue to consume them as food. In response, research has introduced the meat paradox, which describes the cognitive dissonance that arises when one eats meat while simultaneously caring for animals and acknowledging the ethical concerns associated with animal suffering in meat production (e.g. [Bastian and Loughnan, 2017](#); [Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2018](#); [Panagiotou and Kadianaki, 2019](#)). Most studies to date have focused on how people justify and maintain their meat-eating behaviour to resolve the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance ([Fechner and Isbanner, 2025](#)). Several explanations have been identified for this behaviour, including consumers' lack of active reflection on, or questioning of, their habits of consuming animals ([Jallinoja et al., 2018](#); [Khara et al., 2021](#)). Although consumers may consider ethical issues and feel empathy for animals when making dietary choices, they often overlook the animals themselves ([Gradidge et al., 2021](#)) and fail to connect the meat they eat with its animal origin ([Bryant et al., 2022](#); [Tian et al., 2016](#)). Furthermore, some consumers may even deny that animals possess sentience ([Aboelenien and Arsel, 2022](#)).

Despite research indicating that many consumers experience the meat paradox, few studies have examined those who have actually stopped eating meat, leaving a gap in understanding the meanings and practices involved in this choice ([Gradidge et al., 2021](#); [Rothgerber and Rosenfeld, 2021](#)). Moreover, prior meat paradox studies tend to conceptualise consumers as fixed subjects with stable, individually focused attitudes and behaviours, rather than as emergent, relational subjects whose consumption evolves across different contexts, social processes and over time.

Building on this background and the identified research gaps, our study focuses on the sociocultural meanings underpinning plant-based dietary choices. Specifically, it addresses animal-related concerns surrounding the meat paradox, aiming to explore the sociocultural meanings assigned to animals by those who have made the choice to reject meat and adopt plant-based diets. The study uses a qualitative netnographic approach ([Kozinets, 2002](#)) by exploring publicly available writings by Finnish bloggers who share their thoughts and

experiences of dietary change. This approach, rarely employed in the meat paradox literature, facilitates the identification of naturally occurring discussions about confronting and resolving the dilemma, thereby deepening our understanding of the socioculturally constructed, animal-related meanings surrounding the meat paradox.

The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the meat paradox. Firstly, by taking a sociocultural view of the issue, the study addresses the complex web of social, cultural and historical animal-related meanings reflected in consumers' plant-based dietary choices (e.g. [Bastian and Loughnan, 2017](#); [Buttler and Walther, 2022](#); [Gradidge *et al.*, 2021](#); [Panagiotou and Kadianaki, 2019](#); [Rothgerber, 2020](#)). The study identifies categories of animal-related meanings – viewing animals as unique beings, as equal beings and as cared-for beings. These dynamic and symbolic meanings underscore the central role of animals and human–animal relationships in shaping dietary choices, especially when such choices challenge prevailing social norms (e.g. [Autio *et al.*, 2018](#); [Koskinen, 2022, 2023](#)). Secondly, by detailing sub-meanings – more fine-tuned interpretive elements within the broader structure of meaning categories – our study demonstrates that respect for each animal's existence, recognition of animals' moral equality and rights, and the belief that they deserve compassion and welfare are highly nuanced and deeply embedded within the cultural practices surrounding meat consumption ([Koskinen, 2023](#)). While previous research on meat consumption and plant-based eating has considered animal welfare alongside other considerations, such as environmental, economic and health concerns (e.g. [Dagevos, 2021](#); [Ghaffari *et al.*, 2022](#); [Salmivaara *et al.*, 2022](#); [Wolfswinkel *et al.*, 2024](#)), our findings show that animal-related concerns extend beyond welfare and ethics. Valuing animals as unique, equal and cared-for beings is strongly related to dietary choices, drawing attention to the profound role of animals and human–animal relationships in shaping consumers' behaviour ([Wunderlich *et al.*, 2021](#)).

This study has important implications for marketers and policymakers promoting plant-based diets. Our findings indicate that the responsibility for dietary change should not be placed on individual consumers alone; rather, the surrounding market environment plays a decisive role in shaping whether consumers adopt plant-based eating. Therefore, marketers and policymakers must take seriously the dilemmas consumers face when eating meat and provide market-based solutions to address them. Such solutions include integrated and consistent communication strategies, efforts to normalise plant-based eating, and representations of animals as individual, equal and cared-for beings.

Next, the paper examines the meat paradox and argues why it should be understood as a socioculturally constructed issue. It then outlines the study's methodology and findings, concluding with a discussion of its theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. A sociocultural view on the meat paradox

The literature on the meat paradox originates from the theory of cognitive dissonance. In essence, cognitive dissonance refers to the conflict between accepted behaviour within one's social environment and one's personal values and beliefs, or between social and personal norms ([Festinger, 1962](#)). This treats consumers as fixed subjects with stable, individual-focused characteristics. When applied to the context of meat consumption, the meat paradox implies the discomfort or dissonance that emerges when one simultaneously desires to consume meat while also wanting to avoid causing harm to animals ([Bastian and Loughnan, 2017](#); [Bratanova *et al.*, 2011](#); [Buttler and Walther, 2022](#); [Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2018](#); [Loughnan *et al.*, 2010](#)).

Consequently, much of the literature on the meat paradox has centred on individual-focused explanations for why consumers continue to eat meat despite its contradictions, presenting several detailed reasons that fall into three categories (Bastian and Loughnan, 2017; Bratanova *et al.*, 2011; Buttlar and Walther, 2022; Rothgerber and Rosenfeld, 2021). Firstly, the prevailing social norms protect consumers from experiencing the discomfort associated with the meat paradox (Bastian and Loughnan, 2017), and consumers justify their meat consumption by morally distancing themselves from the act of eating animals (e.g. Gradidge *et al.*, 2021; Rothgerber, 2020). Secondly, modern consumers are increasingly disconnected from the process of slaughtering and producing meat (Buscemi, 2014; Ruby and Heine, 2012; Rothgerber and Rosenfeld, 2021). To illustrate this point, certain meat parts that are clearly identified with the animal, such as heads, legs and tails, are often removed in contexts in which consumers interact with meat – for example, in supermarkets (Berndsen and van der Pligt, 2004; Buscemi, 2014). Thirdly, research has shown that consumers often disassociate the meat they consume from the animal that it comes from (Bryant *et al.*, 2022; Kunst and Hohle, 2016). By denying or diminishing animals' ability to suffer, consumers may categorise animals as mere food rather than as sentient beings (Aboelenien and Arsel, 2022; Bastian *et al.*, 2012; Ruby and Heine, 2012). Consequently, some animals are perceived to be more suitable for food consumption than others; for example, consumers are generally less attentive to the welfare of animals that are considered primarily for production, such as pigs and cows, as opposed to dogs and cats (Joy, 2010; Tian *et al.*, 2016). Thus, research suggests that consumer attitudes towards certain animals are shaped by the extent to which they attribute human characteristics to them (Hémar-Nicolas *et al.*, 2024; Jyrinki, 2012; Keaveney, 2008; Marquis *et al.*, 2024).

Although existing research offers various explanations for the meat paradox, it has largely overlooked more dynamic, contextually embedded and relational perspectives on the phenomenon. By adopting a sociocultural perspective on the meat paradox, we situate it within historical, sociocultural and lifespan contexts (Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017). Here, meanings are understood as socially constructed interpretations that shape how individuals understand and negotiate everyday life and its practices, such as food consumption.

Meat has played a central role in dietary practices across various cultures and is deeply embedded in cultural traditions (Aboelenien and Arsel, 2022; Joy, 2010). Hence, we contend that consumers must work through several psychological, social and cultural barriers, such as confronting cognitive biases and navigating complex emotional and relational entanglements of food, to overcome the normative pressures of meat consumption (Bryant *et al.*, 2022; Koskinen, 2022). For example, prior studies on plant-based eating have demonstrated that consumers might shift to a plant-based diet after recognising the connection between food and its animal origin, or after being exposed to information about animal welfare (Jabs *et al.*, 1998). When consumers acknowledge the ethical issues of meat production, they must confront their personal contribution to avoidable animal suffering, as well as the role of their broader social environment – including friends, family and institutions – in perpetuating the system of normalised animal exploitation (Bryant *et al.*, 2022).

In essence, sociocultural meanings related to animals and human–animal relationships are in constant motion and shape consumers' meat consumption (Joy, 2010; Koskinen, 2022; Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2018). This relationship often relies on rigid binary oppositions between animals and humans (Aboelenien and Arsel, 2022). When animals are perceived as companions, they are regarded as inedible (Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2018). These meanings evolve over a person's lifespan and are reflected in experiences such as pet ownership or awareness of animal welfare. Conversely, animals seen as objects may still

evoke pity and become targets of care, with these sentiments shifting according to individual life experiences and socialisation (Koskinen, 2023).

Building on the background information provided, we aim to identify the types of animal-related meanings conveyed by those who have made the choice to reject meat and adopt plant-based diets.

3. Method

Given the exploratory nature of the study and its focus on socioculturally constructed meanings surrounding the meat paradox, a qualitative netnographic approach was employed. Netnography, a form of ethnographic research conducted online, builds on the unique characteristics of the internet to gain ethnographic insights (Kozinets, 1998, 2015). Netnography can be used to uncover previously unexplored topics and to understand how consumers share thoughts and experiences on the internet (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Rageh *et al.*, 2013; Vo Thanh and Kirova, 2018).

Netnography has several advantages as a method for gathering information about shared meanings. One key strength is its unobtrusive, non-influenced nature, as it is not based on researcher-elicited responses (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2012; Costello *et al.*, 2017; Kozinets, 2002). In addition, netnography is naturalistic (Kozinets, 2002), distinguishing it from other research methods, such as interviews, which can face challenges related to accessibility, sensitivity and anonymity (Rageh *et al.*, 2013). One essential aspect of netnographic research is the decision regarding the role of the researcher – active or passive – and the level of disclosure, whether overt or covert (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2012).

In this study, data were collected through unobtrusive observation, meaning that we assumed a passive, covert role as lurkers (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2012; Kozinets, 2002). To ensure that the data remained as natural as possible, we did not interfere with the pre-existing blogs (Arsal *et al.*, 2010). It has been suggested that researchers should, among other things, openly communicate their presence and research goals, as well as maintain informants' confidentiality and anonymity (Kozinets, 2002); however, it has also been argued that such an approach is not always necessary (e.g. Langer and Beckmann, 2005). A covert approach is recommended when the subject is sensitive (Langer and Beckmann, 2005) and when the study aims to avoid disrupting naturally occurring conversations (e.g. Arsal *et al.*, 2010), which was a crucial requirement for our research, as vegans and vegetarians may encounter uncomfortable situations and even hostility owing to their dietary choices (e.g. Beardsworth and Keil, 1991). In addition, consent was not requested, since the blogs were open, accessible and publicly available, and had primarily been posted months or even years prior to the study (Arsal *et al.*, 2010), making it infeasible to seek feedback from the bloggers or their audience (Kozinets, 2002). Furthermore, we do not identify any individual blog or blogger, and we paraphrase excerpts to prevent them from being attributable to a specific blog entry.

We collected data from blog posts that enabled access to discussions among Finnish consumers about plant-based eating. As our inquiry focuses on the animal-related meanings of those who have made the choice to reject meat, we do not differentiate between plant-based diets. In line with Hargreaves *et al.* (2023), we use the term plant-based to describe an eating pattern that largely or completely excludes animal-derived foods; that is, it is employed as an umbrella category for both vegan and vegetarian diets.

Blogs offer a valuable avenue for uncovering consumption practices, values, meanings and beliefs (Kozinets, 2006). While blogs are situated in social contexts, following Gannon and Prothero (2016), we did not analyse interactions with or among blog audiences. Instead, we used the blog posts to access self-produced texts about dietary choices in which shared

meanings circulate. Accordingly, rather than targeting professional bloggers and influencers, we focused on blogs that serve as “online diaries”. Although these blogs are public, and thus written with at least an implicit audience in mind, they nonetheless contain naturally occurring self-narratives and reflect everyday understandings and experiences (Hookway, 2008).

The data were collected between January and February 2024. Blog posts were identified using Google and Blogit.fi, an online platform that aggregates blog posts. The keywords used were “why I am vegan”, “why I am vegetarian”, “veganism” and “vegetarianism”. All in all, texts written by 30 bloggers were found. To ensure that the posts addressed the meat paradox by advocating dietary change and shared personal experiences rather than commercial content, we applied the following selection criteria:

- The blogger followed a plant-based diet.
- The blog post revealed that the blogger had experienced a conflict between meat consumption and concern for animals.
- The blogger positioned themselves as an individual consumer and peer of the reader.
- There was no evidence of commercial collaboration. At this stage, four bloggers who identified as omnivores were excluded from the data.

The final data comprised texts by 26 bloggers from different blogs (91 pages), all maintained by individual authors (see Table 1) and published between 2009 and 2022. In these texts, bloggers shared their thoughts and experiences concerning their plant-based diets, and discussed the issues underpinning their dietary choices.

The data analysis comprised two main steps. Firstly, two researchers independently analysed the data. To become familiar with the material and to establish analytical guidelines, the researchers used “animal-related meanings” as the unit of analysis, focusing on the interpretive patterns embedded in the writings rather than on individual attitudes or behaviours. The analysis followed the principles of inductive data analysis Spiggle (1994) and led to the development of preliminary categories. A reflexive approach was maintained throughout the data analysis, with the researchers consistently considering and critically discussing how their personal values, assumptions and experiences could influence interpretation. This ongoing reflexivity enhanced both the rigour and depth of the analysis Alvesson and Sköldbeg (2018). This first stage continued until a shared understanding of the three main categories was reached, ensuring that the final categories were firmly grounded in the data. In total, 107 excerpts addressing animal-related meanings were identified.

Secondly, the researchers conducted a deeper analysis of the previously identified main categories. The aim was to gain further insights into what underpins these categories, specifically by examining how animals were approached in the writings. At this stage, seven distinct sub-meanings were identified that helped clarify the nuances within the main categories. These sub-meanings represent more fine-tuned interpretive elements embedded within the broader categories. Although each sub-meaning is clearly defined, they overlap, as is often the case with nuanced themes, as recognised in the literature (Nicmanis, 2024).

The researchers conducted multiple rounds of comparison to uncover recurring patterns and shared thematic features across the blogs. The definitions of the three main meaning categories and seven sub-meanings were thoroughly discussed within the research team, with the researchers engaging in reflexive dialogue to critically examine their interpretations.

Table 1. Blogger's ID, diet type and blog's thematic emphasis

ID	Blogger's diet	Thematic emphasis	ID	Blogger's diet	Thematic emphasis	ID	Blogger's diet	Thematic emphasis
B1	Vegetarian	Lifestyle	B10	Vegan	Sustainability	B19	Vegan	Lifestyle
B2	Vegan	Lifestyle	B11	Vegan	Sustainability	B20	Vegetarian	Food
B3	Vegan	<i>Blog discontinued</i>	B12	Vegetarian	Sustainability	B21	Vegan	Family
B4	Vegan	Literature	B13	Vegan	Lifestyle	B22	Vegetarian	Family
B5	Vegetarian	Lifestyle	B14	Vegetarian	Lifestyle	B23	Vegan	Politics
B6	Vegetarian	Lifestyle	B15	Vegetarian	Music	B24	Vegetarian	Crafts
B7	Vegan	Beauty and fashion	B16	Vegetarian	Lifestyle	B25	Vegetarian	Food
B8	Vegan	Family	B17	Vegan	Travelling	B26	Vegetarian	Politics
B9	Vegan	Food	B18	Vegetarian	Lifestyle			

Source(s): Authors' own work

Finally, the findings were assessed in terms of their consistency, transferability, and the extent to which data saturation had been achieved.

4. Findings

Focusing on animal-related meanings associated with plant-based dietary choices, [Table 2](#) presents the main findings of this study. In the table, meanings are organised into three main categories: animals as unique beings, animals as equal beings and animals as cared-for beings. Each category is further illustrated with specific sub-meanings denoting more fine-tuned interpretive elements within the broader structure of the meaning categories. The final column provides excerpts from blog posts that exemplify each meaning.

4.1 Animals as unique beings

Within the first category, animals are seen as unique beings whose lives should be respected. These meanings reflect concerns about the role of animals in consumers' lives ([Wunderlich et al., 2021](#)) and underscore that, to acknowledge the ethical issues of meat production, consumers must confront their personal contribution to avoidable animal suffering ([Bryant et al., 2022](#)). Several blog posts emphasised the recognition that animals possess unique existences. In particular, the posts voiced the idea that animals deserve *the right to live freely*, without human interference. This sub-meaning is illustrated below:

I feel that an animal's right to its own life is greater than my right to enjoy its death. In particular, the intensive production of broiler chickens and pigs causes these animals to suffer. (B11)

Table 2. Animal-related meaning categories surrounding the meat paradox

Meaning categories	Sub-meanings	Excerpts
Animals as unique beings	• Animals have the right to live freely	<i>"Every creature here is born to live its own life [...]"</i> (B3)
	• Animals possess intrinsic value and have ethical rights	<i>"Animal rights are important to me. The easiest way to make sure I'm not involved in the mistreatment of animals is not to eat meat."</i> (B5)
	• Animals have the right to be free from commodification	<i>"[...] and I do not feel that my desires are more important than someone else's right to preserve their species-specific way of life."</i> (B7)
Animals as equal beings	• Animals as sentient beings	<i>"The reason for this [vegetarian diet] is industrial production, which I do not want to support. My reason for being a vegetarian has simply been that I do not want to support the killing of animals and their suffering."</i> (B24)
	• Animals as intelligent beings	<i>"I have been a vegetarian for [a long time]; before that, I was a passionate meat eater. The inclination to try and then maintain a plant-based diet emerged when our family got a dog. Looking into its eyes, I began to wonder why some animals are eaten and others are petted."</i> (B15)
Animals as cared-for beings	• Compassion for animals	<i>"Nevertheless, I care about their well-being and do not wish them unnecessary suffering."</i> (B4)
	• Responsibility towards animals	<i>"In my opinion, those of us who understand have a responsibility to act."</i> (B10)

Source(s): Authors' own work

My life is unique, so the same applies equally to species other than humans. A fish in a lake and a moose in the forest – they, too, only have one life. [...] I began to think a lot about the uniqueness of life. I felt that I no longer wanted to be the reason why anyone should lose their only life. (B1)

Several blog posts also stressed that animals have worth; they *possess intrinsic value* and deserve ethical treatment. Acknowledging animals' intrinsic value implies affirming that animals *have ethical rights* that ought to be protected. Human behaviours that contradict the worth of animals appeared in the writings, particularly in observations of human exploitation, such as harnessing animals' reproductive processes for human purposes. Many of the blog posts also noted human cruelty in its many forms: inhumane living conditions in animal production, the separation of a cow from her calf, and the terror experienced by animals at the moment of slaughter. In these posts, empathy was evident in how the texts expressed compassion for animals' suffering and pain and how they related to animals' experiences, as reflected in two quotations from one blog:

I believe that anyone who visits such a place [a shelter for animals rescued from animal production] and sees happy, peaceful animals doing their own thing will change their perception of pigs, sheep, chickens and cows. Perhaps that would inspire them to see animals as unique beings, not as food, raw materials, kilos or euros. (B3)

When it comes to [animals' lives], there is no need to protect anyone from the facts. [...] there is a huge need for improvement in the conditions of production animals and within the industry [...]. [...] every creature is born here to live their own life, not to be someone else's food or entertainment. (B3)

Many blogs voiced the view that animals have the right to be free from commodification. This perspective was particularly evident in discussions about intensive livestock farming and meat production. As a result, many blogs opposed the use of animals for human consumption – a sentiment powerfully illustrated by one blog remark: “The purpose of a production animal's life is death” (B14). This viewpoint was also connected to critical opinions about the industry's profit-driven motives, with the texts stressing how profits are prioritised over animal welfare. Overall, the writings opposed intensive livestock farming and meat production, viewing these practices as motivated by profit and attributing them to human greed and self-interest:

The human greed and cruelty in industrial meat production are beyond comprehension. (B14)

I don't want to support intensive farming. Therefore, eating meat has long been a thing of the past for me. (B8)

To sum up, the findings reveal that the writings portray animals as unique beings – in the belief that they have the right to live freely, possess intrinsic value and ethical rights, and should not be commodified – collectively encouraging a move towards a plant-based diet. The findings also suggest that reimagining the role of animals can have a powerful impact on dietary choices in favour of animal welfare.

4.2 *Animals as equal beings*

The second category of meanings centres on the idea that all animals, including humans, are equal. This perspective is grounded in the recognition that animals have feelings and thoughts and therefore deserve to be treated with empathy and humanity. Many blog posts described how this understanding often stemmed from personal experiences with pets or animal companions, who were regarded as family members and friends (Hirschman, 1994; Syrjälä, 2016; Wunderlich *et al.*, 2021). By reflecting on their relationships with these

animals, the blog texts reveal a realisation that animals are frequently seen through the lens of human needs. This perspective reinforces a hierarchy between species, granting pets and hobby animals a special moral status while viewing other animals as inferior or as existing primarily for human use (Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2018).

Building on the idea of equality, many posts recognised *animals as sentient beings* capable of suffering and feeling pain. This recognition was manifested in dietary choices, with one post poignantly stating that there is “suffering on the plate” (B18). The following two extracts highlight how this awareness was associated with a willingness to reduce animal suffering:

[...] when I realised that I do not have to participate in harming animals when there are other options available. I do not need to use sentient beings as a means of maintaining my own health and vitality. [...] I am very satisfied that I have, at least to some extent, been able to remove myself from the chain of causing unnecessary suffering to animals. (B7)

This is why I think reducing suffering is a good thing. Reducing animal suffering is worth pursuing, since there are good reasons to assume that animals are capable of [feeling pain] in a way that is specific to them. (B4)

In addition, the data show that animals were viewed as intelligent beings with cognitive abilities. Several blog posts specifically questioned the distinction between animals considered edible and those that are not – a topic also explored in various meat paradox studies [e.g. (Bastian *et al.*, 2012; Jaskari *et al.*, 2015; Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2018; Ruby and Heine, 2012)]. The following two examples illustrate how this controversy was addressed:

We are horrified that cats and dogs are eaten [in many countries]. But the cattle, pigs and sheep that we eat ourselves are as intelligent [...]. [In fact] a pig has the same high level of intelligence as a three-year-old child. (B14)

When I was at the riding school, I could never have imagined that I would eat horse meat. [...] It was time to consider the difference between a pig ending up on the plate and a dog. (B9)

Viewing animals as sentient beings relates to the meat paradox literature (e.g. Bastian *et al.*, 2012; Ruby and Heine, 2012). Our research expands on this by showing that regarding animals not only as sentient and intelligent beings, but above all as equal to one another, including humans, helps resolve the meat paradox through behavioural change, more specifically by choosing to reject meat.

4.3 *Animals as cared-for beings*

The third meaning category encompasses the view of animals as cared-for beings, emphasising their involvement in relationships of care (Koskinen, 2022). Our findings support Koskinen’s (2022) view that animals, as cared-for beings, are regarded as subjects of compassion rather than merely objects of pity. Many blogs recognised that respecting animals’ right to their natural behaviours was an expression of *compassion for animals*, which calls for rejecting meat. As one blogger explained, “I stopped eating meat [...] it was about the welfare of farm animals, their right to a species-appropriate life” (B14). This illustrates how compassionate attitudes can inspire dietary choices that avoid exploiting or harming animals and encourage more caring, mutually beneficial relationships. Throughout the blog posts, animal welfare and the importance of providing care were frequently discussed, with particular attention often paid to concerns related to milk production:

A cow suffers when separated from its calf [...] It is reasonable to assume that species other than humans also have biologically developed protective instincts towards their offspring. (B4)

In my eyes, it's torture to take calves away from their mother and to force a cow to give birth throughout its life just to produce milk. (B10)

Within this meaning category, *responsibility towards animals* emerges as a second sub-meaning. Many blogs discussed how humans occupy the top position in the ecosystem, and for that reason, have a greater duty to care for more vulnerable beings such as animals. The blog posts emphasised that people, in general, are aware of the ethical and moral issues associated with animal production and, as a result, should take responsibility for ensuring animal welfare:

We [...] are better informed about the practices of intensive farming and how animals are treated [...]. (B11)

It doesn't feel like I'm denying myself something. [...] [It's] all about cows and other animals. It's not about me and what I do to myself or have 'promised' [...] but about animals, and what I and other people do to them. (B17)

The study identifies viewing animals as cared-for beings as the third key meaning category in plant-based dietary choices. Related sub-meanings suggest that stewarding human–animal relationships – characterised by compassion and responsibility – is closely connected to these choices.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Research shows that people use various strategies to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962; Gradidge *et al.*, 2021) when experiencing the meat paradox – feeling conflicted about eating meat and caring for animals (e.g. Bastian and Loughnan, 2017; Bratanova *et al.*, 2011; Buttlar and Walther, 2022). We focused on the strategy of aligning behaviour with one's values, and explored animal-related meanings concerning consumers' plant-based diets, including the broader sociocultural meanings that underpinned and framed their choice to reject meat. We regard the meat paradox as a sociocultural phenomenon embedded within historical, social and cultural contexts (Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017). By taking this perspective, our study expands understanding of the meat paradox: beyond viewing it solely as an instance of cognitive dissonance, it highlights the central role of animals and human–animal relationships surrounding meat consumption. Figure 1 visualises how the animal-related meaning categories and their sub-meanings frame consumers' choice to reject meat as a way of resolving the meat paradox. The sub-meanings are depicted as overlapping to highlight their dynamic and relational nature.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

By exploring sociocultural meanings assigned to animals by those who have made the choice to reject meat and adopt plant-based diets, our study makes two main contributions. Firstly, it identifies three animal-related meaning categories – viewing animals as unique beings, as equal beings and as cared-for beings. These categories reflect the social, cultural and historical meanings attributed to animals in the context of the meat paradox. They also underscore the central importance of animals and human–animal relationships in dietary change, particularly as these meanings challenge prevailing social norms (e.g. Autio *et al.*, 2018; Koskinen, 2022, 2023). This is a significant notion given the study's sociocultural context – Finland, a Western country with a strong agricultural heritage, where animal healthcare forms part of the country's quality strategy (Autio *et al.*, 2018; Kupsala *et al.*,

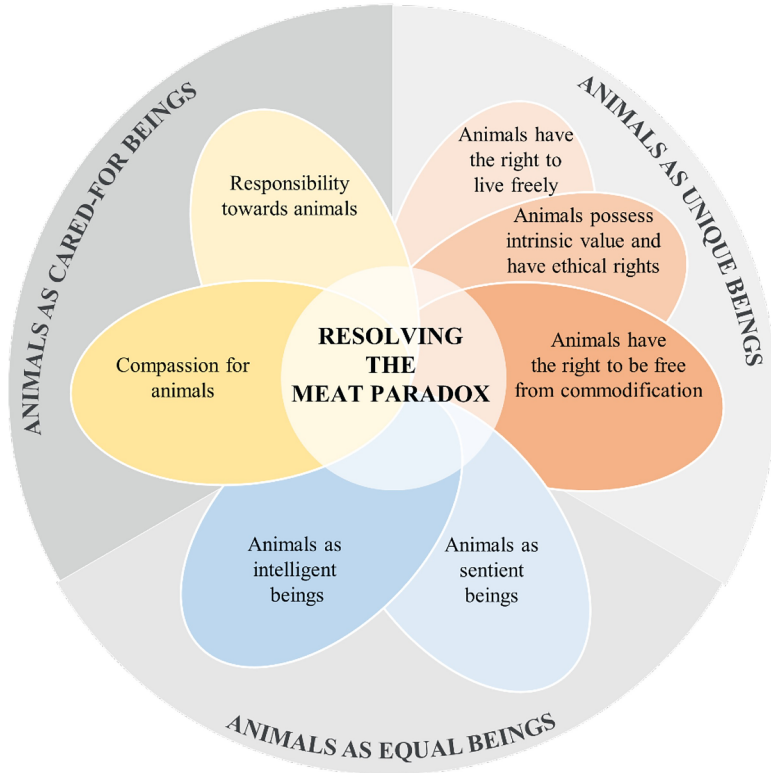


Figure 1. Animal-related meanings in resolving the meat paradox
Source(s): Authors' own work

2011, 2015; Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, 2025). In addition, social norms related to food and eating strongly promote meat consumption (Khara *et al.*, 2021; Koponen and Niva, 2024; Koskinen, 2022, 2023). By revealing animal-related meanings reflected in dietary choices, our study enriches understanding of the sociocultural frames that encourage consumers to challenge prevailing social norms and move away from eating meat (e.g. Khara *et al.*, 2021; Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017).

Secondly, by detailing sub-meanings – namely, animals' right to live freely, their intrinsic value and ethical rights, their right to be free from commodification; animals as sentient and intelligent beings; and compassion and responsibility towards animals – our study shows that concerns for animal existence and approaches to human–animal relationships are nuanced. For example, sub-meanings such as recognising that animals are sentient and intelligent beings not only evoke empathy and moral consideration but also challenge existing justifications for meat consumption. While previous research has examined animal welfare alongside other drivers – such as environmental, economic, health, hedonic, personal accountability and broader ethical concerns – in the context of transitioning to a plant-based diet (e.g. Dagevos, 2021; Ghaffari *et al.*, 2022; Salmivaara *et al.*, 2022), our study demonstrates that consumers' concerns regarding animals go beyond welfare and ethics

alone. Our findings build on previous research showing that consumers' perceptions of an animal's mental capacities influence whether they view that animal as edible (Bastian *et al.*, 2012; Ruby and Heine, 2012). While previous studies have indicated that consumers tend to view only certain animals as inedible (Jaskari *et al.*, 2015; Joy, 2010; Tian *et al.*, 2016), our findings show that all animals can be regarded as equally sentient beings. We further demonstrate that when consumers value animals as equal to one another, including humans, this perspective profoundly shapes their behaviour, underscoring the importance of animal-related concerns in dietary choices (Wünderlich *et al.*, 2021).

To conclude, our findings underscore the importance of integrating animals and their welfare into broader discussions about diet and food consumption, encouraging a shift towards more compassionate and conscious eating habits. The findings underline that consumers acknowledge the intrinsic value of animals as essential beings within nature and, thus, as cared-for beings in the ecosystem. Hence, the focus on animals not only enriches ethical discourse but also fosters a deeper understanding of the multifaceted relationship between humans and animals, ultimately contributing to more informed and empathetic consumer choices.

5.2 Practical implications

The study provides insights for marketers and policymakers aiming to promote plant-based food consumption. To begin with, consumers' dilemmas regarding caring for animals and making food choices deserve focused attention. Our findings suggest that the responsibility for addressing these dilemmas should rest primarily with marketers and policymakers rather than with individual consumers. Building on prior studies examining communication tactics to reduce meat intake (e.g. Carfora *et al.*, 2022; Sparkman *et al.*, 2021), our results underscore the need for a broader, integrated communication ecosystem and a related marketing strategy that consistently foreground animals as unique, equal and cared-for beings. This would require systematic market sensing coupled with a thorough understanding of the processes through which sociocultural meanings of animals are shaped and reproduced.

In practice, this means that the meat paradox should be openly acknowledged, and efforts to promote plant-based diets should deliberately centre on animals. Public campaigns, educational programmes and related initiatives should highlight animals' individuality, equality and welfare – ensuring that animal considerations guide the rationale for reducing meat consumption rather than remaining secondary or minor. As demonstrated by our study, consumers seek not only environmental and health information about animal-based diets but also broader, genuinely transparent knowledge about animal welfare in animal production.

Accordingly, integrated communication should both inform consumers about animals and cultivate respectful, empathetic human–animal relationships. Embedding these meanings within marketing communications can help reframe plant-based eating as a socially supported norm, making compassionate choices feel more familiar, legitimate and easier to adopt and sustain in daily life. Yet information alone is insufficient. Consistent with White *et al.* (2019), consumers require social support to maintain dietary changes; communications that share stories of like-minded adopters and strengthen in-group identity can normalise plant-based eating and shift social norms over time (Wolfswinkel *et al.*, 2024).

5.3 Limitations and future research

While this study provides valuable insights, it also has limitations that highlight opportunities for further research. The data were drawn from bloggers' posts, which may not fully reflect the diversity of consumer experiences; accordingly, the findings are not intended

to be generalised. Future research could therefore use alternative methods – such as surveys, interviews or longitudinal studies – to capture broader perspectives, track how animal-related meanings develop over time, and assess how these changes influence long-term dietary habits. Future research should also compare vegans and vegetarians within similar data sets, with particular attention to differences in animal-related meanings connected to milk and dairy production. Such analyses could clarify how interpretations of animals and human–animal relationships differ between these groups and how such differences shape dietary choices and their maintenance. Moreover, we encourage studies that explicitly adopt perspectives in which animals are viewed as equal to humans. For instance, future research could analyse social science discussions on other-than-human beings (Blanco-Wells, 2021) to illuminate the complex socio-material dynamics involved in meat consumption. Finally, as Khara *et al.* (2021) suggest, further exploration of sociocultural meanings and norms is warranted. Investigating these norms more deeply could yield richer insights into how people confront and resolve the meat paradox, the challenges they face in doing so, and the broader implications of these processes in a global context.

AI declaration

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used OpenAI's ChatGPT vs 4, 4.1 and 5 in order to improve readability, clarity and fluency. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Further reading

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